

PITTSBURGH CELEBRATES LONG AWAITED OPENING OF COMMUNITY CENTER

Pittsburgh area members proved the validity of the saying, “a journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step,” as they celebrated the long-awaited opening of their first community center on Aug. 8.

More than 130 people, together with SGI-USA General Director Fred Zaitso, filled the new 3,500-square-foot structure to capacity at this joyous event that was 33 years in the making.

The first step of the journey began with small meetings at Carnegie Mellon in 1970. The membership then consisted of six pioneer Japanese women who had moved into the Pittsburgh area and practiced as part of what was then Washington, D.C., district. A handful of American college students simultaneously had begun practicing as members of Philadelphia district. Each group didn't know the other existed, yet somehow they eventually found each other, and the rest is history.

In fact, it was auspicious that leaders from both Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. were present to share in the celebration. Today the Pittsburgh area is part of Mid-Atlantic Zone, which includes both cities.

Carmela Menchaca, Philadelphia Region leader, expressed her heartfelt congratulations on the opening and recalled her first trip in 1971, when five or six cars of members came to establish an official group in Pittsburgh and encourage the members there. On the way, her car was in an accident. “What could have been a disaster was instead an experience about the power of this practice that I have never forgotten,” Carmela said. “Over the last 28 years, I have come to Pittsburgh many times always to encourage the members. Each time I have always felt that I was the one who got encouraged and refreshed from your tremendous effort and spirit. Today, because of your spirit and effort, we can celebrate a dream come true.”

Bill Aiken, who had spent some time practicing in Pittsburgh as a young men's division member in 1971 and later supported the area for many years as a territory leader in Philadelphia, said, “I can't help but think of all the members whose prayers and efforts so much laid the foundation and are now taking form and blossoming today!”

The new community center is located in the Greentree area of Pittsburgh. Six colorful posters of trees representing each district — Centre, Liberty, Mountain, North Star, Rising Sun and West Virginia — were adorned with hundreds of colorful flowers representing an hour of daimoku chanted.

Area leader Bruce Jones recalled his efforts to begin practicing in the mid-'70s and the appreciation he felt for the tremendous support he received from “a handful of Japanese women who were determined to share this practice with Americans.” He said: “As we are opening the first community center in Pittsburgh, I feel the same deep sense of appreciation for all of you today who have carried out your faith and practice diligently for three decades. Now we are determined to create a place where anyone can come to chant and receive warm encouragement.”

Many of the pioneer members were present at the opening to witness their dream come true. This historic event also drew out members who haven't participated in a while, and even a self-invited guest, Carolyn Tanguy, who just happened to see a write-up in the local newspaper. She said, “I was happy that I found out about the event because I wanted to

learn more about Buddhism.”

Mayor Tom Murphy sent a proclamation declaring “August 8, 1999, to be SGI-USA Day in Pittsburgh.”

Though the community center opening marked a destination reached, the long journey for kosen-rufu in Pittsburgh is just beginning. As Carmela said: “Let us not view today as an end but as a new beginning. Let’s unite together in our determination to create a new era of hope and peace in Pittsburgh, based on the Mystic Law.”

Alain Kouyate, Pittsburgh area YMD leader, pledged to “foster and nurture youth that will take care of our new castle of kosen-rufu.... This community center,” he said, “will become a beacon of hope in all of western Pennsylvania through the power of its members and will draw many people to chant in this area. I will dedicate my life in the next years to sharing this practice with all youth in the Pittsburgh area.”

Mr. Zaitzu congratulated Pittsburgh on its new community center and encouraged all to “make Pittsburgh and the community prosperous and harmonious, create a new era of rich spiritual prosperity filled with harmony and respect for all, and become the driving force for a second American renaissance.” He spoke of the tremendous power of hope that Buddhism offers, citing examples of baseball player Orlando Cepeda’s journey from “shame to fame” and the youth division’s current “Victory Over Violence” campaign. “As long as we have hope,” he said, “there is nothing that cannot be achieved.... Possessing a dream gives rise to hope and draws forth inner potential and strength and enables us to make dreams come true. Faith sets hope alight.”

Mr. Zaitzu also praised the youth’s determination and encouraged them to “share this practice and the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism with all of society for peace.”

—BARBARA FELLMAN